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"Cutting the Wire": The Landless Movement in Brazil

JAN ROCHA

Over the last two decades, the Movement of the Landless Rural Workers has become Brazil's most powerful popular movement and a model for many similar groups around the world. The emergence at the end of the twentieth century of a mass organization of landless peasants demanding land reform can only be understood when viewed against Brazil's archaic land structure, where 1 percent of landowners own 46 percent of the land and government inspectors are still discovering slave labor on Amazon cattle ranches. Sociologist José de Souza Martins, who has written extensively on the subject, believes that the land question lies at the heart of the many problems that Brazil has encountered in turning itself into a modern and democratic country. "A certain poverty of perspective has sustained the view, even among sociologists, that the land question is only of interest to rural workers and no one else. [It is a] residual problem of the past, they say, that will be resolved with the inevitable progress and urban development. . . . [I]n reality the agrarian question engulfs us all. . . . Land ownership explains the resilience of Brazil's outdated political system. Landowners have allied themselves with modern capitalism, thus injecting the old political system with a renewed force that has enabled it to block the creation of civil society and to prevent its members from becoming true citizens."

The Movement of the Landless Rural Workers is a direct descendent of scores of peasant rebellions in the backlands of Brazil that attempted to change the concentrated system of land ownership introduced by the Portuguese monarchy when the vast territory, already inhabited by several million indigenous people, was claimed for the crown in 1500. All the rebellions, right up to the Ligas Camponesas (Peasant Leagues) of the 1960s, were savagely crushed by militias, police, or armed forces acting on behalf of the landed oligarchies. Attempts to reduce the political power of the landowners have foundered because of their continuing influence over large sectors of the rural electorate, whether by corruption, intimidation, or more recently, through the mass media.

WESTWARD EXPANSION, BRAZILIAN STYLE

Although formally founded in 1984, the landless movement has its roots in the 1970s, when Brazilian agriculture was experiencing the "most rapid and most intense period of mechanization in its history." This "painful modernization," as Jose Graziano da Silva, one of the country's leading agricultural experts, called it, produced an army of desperate people looking for land. Thousands of families were forced off their small holdings, some to make way for large mechanized farms of soybeans, the new cash crop, others when banks foreclosed on their properties after bad harvests. Families were also removed to make way for the building of giant hydroelectric dams. The result was a growing contingent of landless families in Brazil's three southernmost farming states: Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina, and Paraná.

To defuse the social unrest, the military regime that had seized power in 1964 after overthrowing the civilian president, João Goulart, introduced a settlement program in the Amazon basin. Families

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set out on a twentieth-century equivalent of America's westward expansion, leaving the temperate climate of the south to travel thousands of miles in buses and trucks to the rainforest, home to the few thousand survivors of the many indigenous nations that once roamed the land. Most settlers, abandoned to their fate in a hostile climate, immediately fell victim to malaria and struggled to survive with slash-and-burn subsistence farming. Once the forest was cleared, large companies and commercial cooperatives, attracted by generous tax breaks from the government, moved in, expelling the small farmers or using them as laborers.

Violence became respectable. "Military repression in itself paved the way for the big landowners to deploy gunmen and bandits all over the country in the certainty that they would not be punished and would even be seen as allies in the use of violence to maintain order," commented Souza Martins. "Never in the history of Brazil did the *latifúndio* [large landowners] make such unbridled use of private violence as during the military years." Moving thousands of landless families to the other end of the country also helped defuse the pressure for agrarian reform that deposed President Goulart had promised.

A large number of landless families in the south did not bend to the pressure to travel to the Amazon. They were equally reluctant to move to the peripheries of the big cities to become factory hands, wanting instead to stay on the land that had belonged to their parents and grandparents. Most were descendents of nineteenth-century European immigrants who had crossed the Atlantic in steerage, fleeing poverty for a promised land of plenty. In January 1984, after many semiclandestine meetings, a group of almost 100 landless workers—or *sem-terra*, as they were increasingly being called—met at Cascavel in southern Brazil and created the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST, the Movement of the Landless Rural Workers) to fight for land reform. They faced a powerful alliance—Brazil's landowning class was now joined by ranch-owning multinational companies and the military—determined to prevent any meaningful agrarian reform.

The key characteristics of the new movement were established at that January meeting: it would be run by the landless workers themselves, independent of the Roman Catholic Church, the trade unions, and the political parties; it would be open to the entire family, not just the men; and it would be a mass movement. Even at this early stage, the sem-terra were consciously attempting to create an organization different from anything that had previously existed in Brazil. The sem-terra saw themselves as a new type of exploited worker: people who had been expelled from the land by agricultural modernization. As such, they wanted their own movement. Yet they also believed that their struggle for land was part of a broader revolutionary movement to end exploitation and to create a more just society for everyone. Their vision was unashamedly utopian and in that lay much of its appeal to the poor and excluded.

Like its historic predecessors in other countries, the new movement launched at the 1984 Cascavel meeting made its appearance when Brazil was in upheaval. After two decades in power, the military regime had grown demoralized; the country was bankrupt, and unemployment and inflation rates were soaring. After years of censorship and repression, civil society was beginning to flex its muscle once again. Strikes proliferated in the cities, and land conflicts provoked by the expansion of the agricultural frontier were spreading in the countryside. Millions of Brazilians in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and every other major city were taking to the streets to demand free elections.

A year after the Cascavel meeting the MST convened again, this time with 1,500 delegates from across Brazil. Each report from the different regions of the country confirmed what the delegates already knew: the economic model imposed on the country by the military government did not address the needs of peasants, small producers, tenant farmers, or sharecroppers. Driven off the land, thousands of families had already migrated to the swollen cities, where they usually lived in subhuman conditions in shantytowns. Largely excluded from the educational system by the need to work from an early age, they were handicapped by illiteracy and ignorance.

To increase the MST's membership dramatically, the delegates decided to organize mass actions and mass occupations. They adopted the slogan "Occupation Is the Only Solution"—meaning agrarian reform would only happen if they made it happen. They targeted large unfarmed estates with absentee landlords and empty public lands.

Over the next few years the MST spread throughout Brazil, organizing, occupying land, and demonstrating. It built on the foundations laid by the Catholic Church's Pastoral Land Commission, which was set up in the 1970s to denounce violence and organize peasant resistance, and other local popular organizations, especially the rural unions, but it also created something new: a movement led by the rural workers themselves.

Reactionary landowners determined to stop land reform employed posses of hired guns to evict and harass the sem-terra. Between 1982 and 1985, peasant leaders, union officials, and rural workers were killed and many injured during violent evictions, ambushes, and shootings at camps. Yet the act of occupying, of "cutting the wire" to break through the fence that surrounded the targeted estate, became an act of emancipation for men and women who up until that moment "had been trained always to obey, to obey the landowner, the priest, the political boss," in the words of social scientist Roseli Caldart.

Adapting and surviving

Political conditions in the second half of the 1980s and first half of the 1990s favored the MST: the generals had relinquished power, and civilian governments could not ignore the pent-up clamor for land reform. Millions of acres of land were expropriated by the new civilian government and turned over to the MST, giving families who had sometimes spent years under canvas their long-sought-after pieces of land.

By 1999 the MST had 843 settlements in 25 states that were recognized by the National Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform, the government land-reform agency, with 80,000 families occupying 3.6 million hectares of land. Today the number of settlements is probably about 1,200, or one-fifth the total number in Brazil, covering not much more than 1 percent of Brazil's total farming area.

For the movement, settlements mean much more than land for landless families. Over the years MST members have come to realize that their futures do not consist of economically unviable peasant settlements existing in a time warp but modern, sustainable, green communities. Moving away from traditional chemical- and pesticide-based farming, they are beginning to experiment with sustainable organic farming, cultivating and selling organic seeds and products. Early experiments in collective farming borrowed from Cuba proved disastrous, so now each settlement is free to develop its own system, whether cooperative, individual, or mixed.

The MST quickly concluded that it would not get very far with farming unless it did something about education. Even toward the end of the twentieth century, illiteracy levels in rural Brazil were still extremely high. At many of the first MST meetings in Brazil's northeast the minutes could not be taken because not a single person could read or write. The MST has now become the main force for popular education in rural areas. Many schools and courses are named after Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator whose revolutionary method to eradicate illiteracy was abruptly banned by the military after the 1964 coup. By 2001 about 150,000 children were enrolled in 1,200 primary and secondary schools in MST settlements and camps.

The MST's contribution to education has been recognized by international organizations like UNESCO and UNICEF through joint projects, and seven Brazilian universities provide degree courses in pedagogy for teachers. The movement is also building its own college near São Paulo, using volunteer brigades from the settlements.

Setting up an alternative education system was not among the MST's original aims. "It is the MST way of doing things," explains geographer Bernardo Mancano Fernandes, who has studied the movement in detail. "It doesn't have preconceived ideas about what it can and cannot do. Everyday life throws up a need and the MST responds to it. And then the practice it acquires in meeting that need leads to the formulation of a strategy. It is this way of behaving that enables the MST to adapt and survive."

A new social contract

Education is not restricted to schools and colleges. The occupations—which have continued as an essential MST tactic by which to maintain pressure on the government to continue to expropriate land—can last months or years, with families living in tents in fields with minimum hygiene and often little food. Here, in these unique "schools of life," men and women learn to work together, to organize the camp, acquire self-assurance and knowledge, become citizens. Many who now run the schools, dairies, farm cooperatives, or meat-packing plants on the settlements began their lives with no other prospects than life as an illiterate laborer.

Taking advantage of the initial impetus created by the occupation, the MST leaders have turned the temporary camps into a "laboratory for creating social awareness." Conditions in the camps are uniquely suited for such an exercise in social engineering. Deprived of their normal sources of entertainment, particularly television, and anxious to grasp with both hands the new opportunity they have been given, the sem-terra are willing to "think the unthinkable."

The MST's achievements in these camps are remarkable. People who long have been oppressed and exploited now vote in assemblies and take charge of their own lives. The MST has developed an

effective daily routine for getting people involved. "In the camps the MST introduces an organic structure that, through sectors, commissions, and other forms of organization, brings people together, distributes power, and constructs democracy," according to Ademar Bogo, a former Catholic seminarian who supported the MST from the beginning and has become the movement's main thinker on cultural matters. Everyone in the camps, from the very young to the very old, must participate in one of these bodies, be it a young people's brigade to clean the camp or a health commission to deal with routine ailments. Through these activities people learn to behave responsibly.

The MST does not offer easy "salvation." The values of self-denial and personal sacrifice, inherited from the founding members' Catholic training, are very evident. "Everyone deserves a chance," said Cícero Honorio Alves, an MST activist in Pernambuco who once had a drinking problem himself. "Almost all of the damaged people we recruit—the alcoholics, the drug addicts, and the depressed—can recover, but it takes discipline." The camp is the first stage in the recovery process, and it is there that the discipline is most rigorous. The MST instills two kinds of discipline in its camps: the external, almost military, discipline of getting up early to take part in the first assembly, helping run the camp, and preparing for "mass resistance" with singing, marching, and the shouting of slogans; and the internal discipline of not drinking alcohol and not engaging in violence toward a spouse or children. New recruits are given several chances to change their ways, but if they do not (or cannot), they are expelled. If a sem-terra is caught with bottles of *cachassa* (sugarcane rum) in the camp, he is reprimanded in public and the drink is poured onto the ground. A second or third offense leads to expulsion.

Without electricity, there is no television. Instead there is political debate, as the militants explain the movement's ideas. Political indoctrination does not usually get very far, as scarcely literate peasant farmers grapple with Marxist concepts like "surplus value" or "mode of production." More often the discussions are rooted in everyday reality, with the activists attempting to explain the underlying reasons for poverty and exploitation to the families.

The MST realized that in the struggle to conquer land, the capacity of the sem-terra families to resist cultural domination was even more important than their ability to rebuff physical attempts by gunmen to evict them from their camps. To give the families the courage and confidence to defy the status quo, they needed to create a counterculture with symbols. At first, the MST adopted the image of the peasant farmer's straw hat, but in 1988 members decided it sent the wrong message, implying that the movement was old fashioned and conservative. After lengthy discussions they chose more defiant symbols: red baseball caps and t-shirts, stamped with the MST flag, soon became a common sight. Today they are powerful instruments of sem-terra identity. The distinctive red flag, however, with a green map of Brazil in the center and the image of a peasant couple, is now being questioned inside the movement. While the man is brandishing a machete, the woman is standing passively beside him, her hands empty. For the women in the MST, that is not the symbol they want.

The MST has made it clear that it will not abdicate its right to march, protest, and occupy large estates until all of Brazil's almost 5 million landless families receive land.

The contribution women have made to the movement's construction has always been recognized by the leadership. Despite this, women have faced a long and difficult struggle to be treated as equals. In the early years, there was resistance within the MST to the involvement of women in leadership roles. "The movement always recognized the importance of women in the occupations, the marches, and the demonstrations, but it wasn't keen about having women as leaders. The MST wasn't nurtured in a goldfish bowl, separate from the rest of society. It is part of peasant culture and reflects the machismo in this culture. At first, men looked at us strangely when we spoke at meetings and stood for election. It was quite intimidating," recounts Itelvina Maria Mazioli, a woman activist. The difficulties did not just come from the machismo of male activists. Many women, particularly in the more remote rural areas, find it difficult to break with ingrained sexist customs. But change is gathering pace. In the 2000 elections nine women were elected to the 21-member national leadership.

THE MOVEMENT'S FUTURE

The MST's achievements remain largely unknown to the Brazilian public. This is partly because the leadership has never sought to publicize them, but

also because the media, with few exceptions, has preferred to concentrate on stories about the MST's alleged violence and illegality—the tactics of occupying not only large estates but government banks and agencies to demand credit and technical assistance. This hostility was reinforced in the last years of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso's government as police, prosecutors, and judges attempted to criminalize the movement. Leaders were arrested on charges of being involved in a criminal gang rather than a social movement, protesters were thrown into prison for months, and a law was introduced to ban land that had been "invaded" by the sem-terra from being expropriated for land reform for at least two years following the occupation, thus removing one of the MST's most powerful methods of pressure.

The MST became a vociferous opponent of the Cardoso government, with leaders stridently attacking its economic and agricultural policies, including attempts to legalize genetically modified crops. New market-oriented land-reform programs were designed to sideline the movement, encouraging individual applications for land.

The election of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the presidential candidate of the left-wing Worker's Party (PT) at the end of 2002, has changed the prospects for the MST. Although Brazil's main agricultural exports will remain in the hands of big business, more favorable treatment is expected for family agriculture and settlements. Land reform has been a solid plank in the PT's program since its founding in 1980. After years of ostracism by the outgoing government, MST leaders are once more being invited to talks with leaders in Brasília. Perhaps they will be given the opportunity to prove their claim that MST settlements, if given the right financial and technical support, could help feed the 30 million Brazilians who suffer from malnutrition.

In its brief existence, the MST has built up a dynamic nationwide movement of settlements and schools, cooperatives and courses. Through the movement, hundreds of thousands of men and women have achieved real citizenship. The violence of Brazil's landowning class has been exposed, but not ended. An alternative space for agriculture and education has been created. The MST is an active supporter of the worldwide anti-globalization movement, campaigning inside Brazil and sending demonstrators to protests in other countries. It consistently challenged the Cardoso government's orthodox, market-orientated economic solutions. The movement's wider aim—to transform Brazil into a socialist society—may remain unrealized, but under the new government there is at least a greater chance that Brazil will become a less unequal society and that a more ambitious land-reform program will be attempted. The MST has made it clear that it will not abdicate its right to march, protest, and occupy large estates until all of Brazil's almost 5 million landless families receive land. Yet the movement's greatest challenge may now come from within: how to maintain commitment to the movement's ideals by the second generation—those born in the settlements who have not had to endure the struggle, the "school of life" in the occupations. ■